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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 001264

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SUBJECT: TURKEY'S PRESIDENT SEZER NOT A NEUTRAL PLAYER

REF: ANKARA 1180 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Political Counselor Janice G. Weiner for reasons 1.4(b),
(d)

11. (C) Summary and comment. President Ahmet Necdet Sezer remains in office indefinitely after Turkey's abortive presidential election, at least until a new parliament convenes after July 22 elections and attempts to elect his successor. Some give Sezer high marks as the last defense against the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) efforts to "erode" Turkey's secular state. Others view his consistent practice of blocking appointments and reforms as a clear violation of his duty to act as a neutral mediator. Sezer has been largely quiet during Turkey's recent political crisis, after warning in an April 13 speech that the secular Republic is in grave peril. His extended term allows him to make several key appointments, including the head of the Constitutional Court and the party leader who will form Turkey's next government. A former jurist, not a politician, Sezer has refused -- or been unable -- to play the honest broker between the GOT and entrenched state institutions at a time when that is what Turkey's polarized society desperately needs. End summary and comment.

12. (C) On May 16, President Sezer was to turn over his duties to his successor at the end of his seven-year term. Instead, he will now remain in office until a new parliament agrees on a replacement - no easy feat under the quorum requirements set by a May 1 Constitutional Court ruling. Sezer, previously president of the Constitutional Court, was a consensus candidate elected on the third round of voting in 2000, with 330 votes. An ardent secularist, Sezer blocked hundreds of government appointments and vetoed numerous AKP-backed reforms, earning praise from the establishment and ire from pro-modernizing (and pro-Islam) sectors.

Not a Neutral Player...

13. (C) Sezer, as with previous presidents, swore to safeguard the existence of the Turkish state, democracy and the principles of the secular Republic in an unbiased manner. Many argue that he has been anything but a neutral arbiter. In contrast to his predecessor, Suleyman Demirel, Sezer has proved politically tone-deaf and unwilling (or unable) to broker disagreements among competing interests. Sezer helped to worsen rather than repair AKP's strained relations with the military, often aligning with military leaders against the AKP's feared pro-Islam leanings, increasingly overtly since the May 2006 Council of State shooting. While Sezer could serve as a bridge through his separate weekly meetings

with PM Erdogan and the Chief of the Turkish General Staff (who rarely meet face-to-face), there is little evidence he serves as a constructive intermediary.

...Or a Bridge-Builder

14. (C) Sezer also has failed to act as mediator as chairman of the National Security Council (NSC) - a role former president Demirel managed relatively effectively. Sezer, who has warned in several speeches against efforts to render the military ineffective, has done little to bolster the NSC since a civilian took over as Secretary General -- a key EU accession reform. The first civilian NSC head, Yigit Alpogon, admits he cannot fill the void, leading some to conclude the NSC is being sidelined. In refusing for the past six months to approve the GOT's candidate to replace Alpogon, Sezer is further weakening the NSC under civilian leadership.

...Or a Modernizer

15. (C) Sezer's relations with the AKP-dominated parliament have also been rocky. He has batted back hundreds of laws and appointments, leaving AKP appointees to key positions throughout the bureaucracy in "acting" status. On economic policy, Sezer often has proven his statist, anti-free market, anti-reform credentials. He vetoed legislation allowing foreign ownership of Turkish media, despite the media's concentration largely in the hands of one group. He succeeded in derailing Turkey's fiscally-crucial social security reform; when parliament passed it over his veto he referred it to the Constitutional Court, which struck it down. Sezer has, however, long been a proponent of

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individual human rights and Turkey's EU membership process.

...Or a Great Leader

16. (C) Other than a warning shot in his April 13 speech that the secular Republic is in "grave peril", Sezer has been noticeably quiet during Turkey's recent political crisis. He has not commented on the military's April 27 e-memo, the Constitutional Court's May 1 ruling or the massive rallies held around the country. He made no effort to build a national consensus or call political party heads together, despite growing tensions and polarization. When extreme nationalism was escalating dangerously, erupting in Hrant Dink's January 19 murder, no call for tolerance, unity or calm came from Sezer's corner. Secularists may be content with his staunch defense of their interests, but he has treated the more pious, conservative sectors of society and minorities largely as pariahs.

...Or an Internationalist

17. (C) Sezer, like many jurists of his generation, had negligible international experience before assuming the presidency. He was the first Turkish president who was neither an active politician nor senior military officer, having been on the Constitutional Court since 1988. Sezer did not seek the presidency; MPs settled on him after failing to agree on a consensus candidate to replace Demirel. According to some, Sezer was the lowest common denominator nominee. He speaks no foreign languages, and his parochialism often showed through in an old-fashioned, Turkocentric world view. On a key national issue - Iraq - Sezer has refused to invite Jalal Talabani, an Iraqi Kurd, to Ankara. He did, however, travel to Damascus in May 2005, and claims that helped pave the way for Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon.

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